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ABSTRACT

Globalization provides the contextual framework for cultural changes in the library user group. In order to be more effective, and realistically, more client-focused, the reference librarian is challenged to ask again "Who is my client?" in this changing context. This paper presents a positive and practical response to cultural change and suggests ways of moving towards understanding this context. The underlying aim of the paper is to be both positive and constructive. The specific purpose is to: create an awareness of the implications globalization might have for the information workplace; identify cultural issues, influences and circumstances relating to the library user group; add a further dimension to the understanding of cultural diversity issues and their effect on professional practice in the library, especially in relation to reference work; indicate some ways in which libraries can and have responded positively and creatively to the cultural complexity of the library user group. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/AEF)

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## Cultural implications of a global context: the need for the reference librarian to ask again 'who is my client?'

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***Abstract:***

*Globalization provides the contextual framework for cultural changes in the library user group. In order to be more effective, and realistically, more client-focused, the reference librarian is challenged to ask again 'Who is my client?' in this changing context. This paper presents a positive and practical response to cultural change and suggests ways of moving towards understanding this context.*

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### OVERVIEW

Taking responsibility for the library services we offer: 'their quality, their accuracy, their relevance and their appropriateness to the needs of each individual user' is what John Levett describes as the service ethic of the library profession(Levett, 1992, 6). Hence, when asking: 'Who is my client?' there is also the



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duty to develop an awareness of the changing context of the library user. How else can our library services be 'relevant' and 'appropriate'?

It has been suggested that the reference librarian is more eager to develop skills relating to the information resources they access, than to review their role in relation to sociological changes in the client group itself (McSwiney, 2000). One way to address this lacuna is to explore social and cultural issues more often associated with intercultural cooperation in the corporate world, and apply them to practices in information and library reference services. The paper discusses the dimensions of culture identified by sociologist Geert Hofstede in the context of organizational behaviour, and relates them in this instance to information-seeking behaviour in the context of reference work and the library.

There are three parts to the discussion. First, globalization and its related concepts are defined and presented as a contextual framework with special reference to librarianship and information management. Second, there is reference to culture-related issues and the implications these have for library professionals in a culturally diverse and transnational library context. This is relevant whether that workplace be the public library, a corporate library or a school or academic library. Finally the paper reflects briefly on approaches used by two libraries to develop the attitudes and skill-sets of information professionals to enable them to work more effectively in a work environment that is characterised by rapid change and cultural complexity.

### Aims and objectives

The underlying aim of the paper is to be both positive and constructive. The specific purpose of the presentation is to

- create an awareness of the implications globalization might have for the information workplace
- identify cultural issues, influences and circumstances relating to the library user group
- add a further dimension to the understanding of cultural diversity issues and their effect on professional practice in the library, especially in relation to reference work
- indicate some ways in which libraries can and have responded positively and creatively to the cultural complexity of the library user group.

## CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Concepts and related terms

Globalization has been described as a central driving force behind the rapid social, political and economic changes that are reshaping society and the world order (Held et al., 1999,7). This paper takes as its point of reference a broad interpretation of globalization as a set of processes that are perceived to be adding a supranational (overarching) dimension to our way of looking at the world and its regions. The effects of this movement extend across the social domains and influence patterns of migration, concern for the environment, sharing of popular culture and the exchange of information (Held et al., 1999; King, 1997; Giddens, 1999a).

Globalization touches on the thoughts, ideas and processes that affect our everyday lives. The media more often links the changes associated with globalization with power plays between nations, with trade advantages and exploitation leading to a widening gap between the rich and poor, and with the growing dominance of the economically advantaged.[1] However, the effects of the gathering momentum of

[1] The widening gap between the information-rich and the information-poor is a valid concern that raises serious issues for the library and information professions. It strikes at the heart of the 'service ethic' of the librarian and one, which I trust, will be addressed elsewhere in the Conference.

globalization can also be felt across areas of the social domain including the environment, popular culture and the migration of peoples and communication (Held et al., 1999,2). In this sense it can be regarded constructively as a set of processes that can energize much of our thinking and professional practice.

Technological innovation has accompanied, and been integral to changes in global concepts, and the transformation it has effected is fundamental to the management and exchange of information. The interconnectedness that has resulted, and an accompanying sense of constant and rapid change, is particularly characteristic of the workplace of the librarian and knowledge manager. Thus taken in its broader sociological context, globalization can be seen as a source of energy for re-thinking many of the professional assumptions we make in the library/information work environment. At the level of the library user group, the cultural changes it has brought about call for a review of assumptions relating to issues such as cross-cultural communication, patterns of information-seeking and approaches to learning. These are identified and discussed further in the course of the paper.

While globalization takes as its point of reference world consciousness and world systems, internationalization focuses on the nation and the interaction between national entities. Internationalization is interpreted in this context as a response to globalization. I suggest that current policies of internationalization, for example in the Higher Education Sector, find much of their energy and context in the broader framework of globalization. In an effort to internationalize, institutions in Europe and countries of the Pacific Rim are encouraging the enrolment of international students. They also offer incentives to local students to study abroad or study as exchange students doing part or all of their studies in another culture and another country.

The internationalization of education is one positive example of globalization stimulating nations to interact and to enrich each other with fresh cultural insights and exchanges (Giddens, 1999a; 1999b). It is this notion of promoting 'fresh cultural insights and exchanges' at the micro level within the 'culture' of the library profession that is at the heart of this paper.

Ours has been described as a time of 'transformational change... when something comes about that is so radical that it alters the basic performance of our daily activities' (Hawkins & Battin, 1998, 4). Giddens (1999a) suggests that the globalization changes we are now witnessing affect almost every aspect of life and that the movement has been influenced 'above all by developments in systems of communication'. These remarkable changes in communication and innovative developments in the transfer of information can be easily linked in pragmatic library terms not only to the quantity of information available, the development of technology, and the impact of the Web and the Internet, but also account for the changing profile of the library user group.

In recognizing the impact of these developments Jose Marie Griffiths reminds the profession that there have always been 'two overriding imperatives', and that as well as 'knowledge of recorded knowledge domains', librarians need to develop their 'knowledge of the users they serve ranging from the general public in public libraries to highly specialized groups in research and special libraries' (Griffiths, 1998, 236). It is in this spirit of 'knowing the users we serve' in this period of dynamic change, that the next section identifies dimensions of culture and explores how we benefit from, and respond to these insights and exchanges.

## CULTURE-RELATED ISSUES

As library and information professionals become more conscious of their role in providing a link between the information-seeker in an increasingly global social context and global information resources, a deeper understanding of the cultural changes in the library user group can lead to library services that are more effective and realistically more client-focused.

This section identifies some of the main culture-related issues that have been found to play a significant part in the context of offering reference library services in a culturally diverse library environment.

Culture is used in this context to denote 'the set of characteristics that distinguish one group from another' (Hofstede, 1994, 5). In this sense, it is, in the words of Geert Hofstede 'not only a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling and acting learned throughout a person's lifetime' (described by Hofstede as 'mental programs') but also 'the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings' (Hofstede, 1994, 4, 5). It is then in the 'ordinary' information-seeking behaviour in the library - the manner in which the questions are asked, the way in which the librarian is approached - that cultural diversity is evident.

Issues that particularly affect these library behaviour patterns are grouped in the following section under the three headings: dimensions of culture, learning styles and cross-cultural communication.

**Dimensions of culture**

In the context of searching for culture patterns in sub-groups of students, or, in this case, library clients, one needs to heed the warning of Ballard and Clanchy of the dangers of stereotyping behaviour patterns (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997,5,6). However, professional development programs in cultural awareness for the library staff of The University of Melbourne over several years, repeatedly confirmed that the appropriate application of the Hofstede dimensions of culture helped participants to understand and identify patterns of information-seeking in their libraries (McSwiney, Gabb & Piu, 1999). The scope of this paper allows no more than a brief overview of the theories and their application.

Hofstede studied organizational cultural differences and identified their practical implications and there is a summary of these in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (Hofstede, 1994). His work focuses on intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival, and is a valuable aid to understanding transcultural issues in a culturally diverse workplace. The responses of 116,000 IBM employees in over fifty countries in the 1980s were documented (Hofstede, 1994; 1986, 306). The study drew attention to key dimensions of culture that characterise various cultural groups. These dimensions have proved to be a useful tool in understanding transactions and the dynamics of the information environment (McSwiney, Gabb & Piu, 1999; McSwiney, 2001) whether it be the multi-cultural user group of the public library, the internationality that characterises the academic library community, the multi-culturalism found in the public library, or the global nature of the business community that accesses corporate libraries.

Hofstede's concepts of *power distribution*, the *individualist/collectivist* differences between cultures, and various attitudes to *uncertainty avoidance* are reflected in the information-seeking behaviour of the library user. Hofstede's theories throw some light, for example, on the cultural relativity of *power distances* displayed in patterns of library behaviour, perceived in my country of origin to be uncharacteristic of Australians. Attitudes of deference towards senior management and those with titles and status, contrast for example with the egalitarian (seemingly casual) attitude in Australia between employers and employees. Library practitioners have also reported converse situations where the position of the librarian, including the reference librarian, is perceived to be purely a clerical one (McSwiney, 1995, 128) and any opinion she/he might express beyond the location of the information or the rules governing its access, is considered to be out of order. The increased mobility of people from one region of the world to another (whether for migration, study, work or leisure) has resulted in a culturally diverse client group that represents a range of library experiences and expectations. This is so across the library sector and perceptions of professional status vary with the expectations of a fluid library client group currently in a period of dynamic change.

The continuum of *individualist and collectivist* societies mapped by Hofstede helps explain some of the group behaviour patterns and group dependency in the library particularly between co-nationals. Hofstede also found that some societies are more dependent on structures, laws and rules than others, a dimension that Hofstede termed *uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, 1994). This dimension is illustrated in various ways in the library, for example through the undue importance placed on examination papers by a significant number of academic and school library users, or the expectation that the librarian is there to provide a definitive answer (McSwiney, 1995, 140). This pattern of information-seeking is more often associated in the Australian context with sojourning students from Asia, while local students more typically use a self-directed independent approach. These and similar instances are generally associated with library users from those cultural regions which Hofstede studies have found to display a high level of uncertainty avoidance.

Translating Hofstede's concepts into an awareness and understanding of culture differences as they are manifest at the reference interview, results in a more effective and more satisfying interaction for the librarian and the client. The relationship between these theories and information-seeking is an area that invites further research.

**Learning backgrounds**

Learning backgrounds and different approaches to education are a significant factor in the effectiveness of reference services in an environment that is becoming more culturally diverse. These differences are reflected in the information-seeking behaviour of library and information client groups in corporate, public and as well as in academic library contexts. Reference librarians who take seriously their role as educators will be acutely aware of this.

Differences in learning approaches, and variations in information-seeking patterns that arise from these, are closely related to the dimensions of culture identified in Hofstede studies, and were documented by Hofstede in the 1980s in a paper *Cultural differences in teaching and learning* (Hofstede, 1986). Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy of the Study Skills Centre the Australian National University published their observations in relation to international students in Australia in 1991 and updated them in the 1997 publication *Teaching International Students* (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). Diverse approaches to teaching and learning and differences in educational backgrounds influence the interaction that takes place in reference interviews across the library sector, but are particularly apparent in the Higher Education Sector. This is becoming more evident as the sector, particularly in Australia, makes a concerted effort to internationalise 'all aspects' of higher education (Hamilton, 1998). Ballard and Clanchy illustrated the influence of cultural attitudes to knowledge on teaching and learning strategies in their learning continuum representation (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997,12).

In 1995 it was argued that 'there are few single departments within the tertiary institutions in a position to have more significant influence on the sojourn of an international student [in Australia] than the academic library' (McSwiney, 1995,178) and Alan Bundy (1996, 149) suggested that although this is 'an almost self-evident conclusion' it was 'yet to be clearly and consistently reflected in client focus' within Australian university libraries. In the intervening years there have been exceptions, with several institutions offering their staff and international students programs designed to address their differential needs in the academic library. Some of these are outlined in the concluding section of the paper.

Perceptions of the role of the reference librarian have been found to vary according to the client's previous education experiences (McSwiney, 1994; 1995) and these perceptions are manifest in diverse attitudes to self-directed information-seeking and cross-disciplined research. Linked with the *uncertainty avoidance* dimension identified by Hofstede is the case frequently raised by those in professional practice, where students come to the library expecting to find pre-packaged 'answers' to term papers or course



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assignments. One librarian whose portfolio focused on international students reported that sojourning students approach the library with the expectation that the librarian will supply them with 'the book which they hope is going to be *the book*... which can supply them with *the answer*' (McSwiney, 1995,140). In Australia this is remarkable because it is juxtaposed with the approach of local students who, from the earliest stages of their school education are used to cross-disciplined referencing and self-initiated research. The perceived role of the librarian in this case is to facilitate their search for a synthesis of the knowledge. According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), and confirmed by the theories of Hofstede (1994), a critical, analytical approach to learning and research is part of the Australian education experience, and is more common there than in many countries in Asia or South America, where memorization, rote learning and the acceptance of printed facts or 'received wisdom' is closer to the norm.

Knowledge of differences in learning traditions can thus be an effective aid to identifying the expectations of the client and linking them with those of the librarian. It is helpful in formulating the scope of the librarian's role, and helpful in explaining the reticence of some clients to initiate their own information search.

**Cross-cultural communication**

Three reasons for addressing issues of cross-cultural communication have been identified by Kerry O'Sullivan (1994). First he suggests one could argue that it is a worthy goal that 'should' be pursued for the sake of better understanding; second O'Sullivan argues there is a need to examine these issues for successful inter-cultural transactions to take place (it is a means to an end, especially in the business context); or third, it is 'an enjoyable, self-enriching and worthy goal' (O'Sullivan, 1994, 4).

Communication has a dual dynamic, and the librarian as well as the client has a part in the success or failure in communicating a reference transaction. In a context of cultural diversity, there are differences in communication patterns between sub-groups within the library user group, as well as between librarians themselves. In an age of extensive use of digital media, coupled with the assurance of ongoing and substantial dependence on analogue material, (Johanson, Schauder & Lim, 1998, 134) the challenges of cross-cultural communication extend across both the spoken and written word. There are particular demands to be articulate and precise when communicating effectively via electronic means.

Elements of cross-cultural communication influence reference transactions whether they take place in a local multi-cultural context or as part of an international transaction. Oral communication has its own set of challenges whether the transaction is face-to-face, by telephone, or some other form of telecommunication. Phonic and semantic accents pose peculiar problems in a country such as Australia where we take for granted that our English is 'standard' and that our accents and our use of words are universally accepted. Combine, for example, the Australian accent and local colloquialisms with library jargon and acronyms, and non-English speaking clients as well as English speakers from other regions are faced with a formidable challenge.

Online communication circumvents many of the phonic challenges encountered in face-to-face interviews, but additional problems surface when successful interactions depend solely on the written word. The circumlocution practised in some regions of the world (for example, Asia) contrasts with the direct approach (immediately getting to the heart of the matter) generally used in Western society. Here too, cultural customs and traditions account for different patterns in intercultural communication including the choice of topic, non-verbal communication and body language, the use of honorifics and related gestures of respect, the avoidance of 'loss of face', and the interpretation of what constitutes courtesy and politeness (O'Sullivan, 1994, 94). The theories of Hofstede underpin these communication patterns which in themselves demonstrate various interpretations of power distance and levels of uncertainty avoidance.

While in pragmatic terms it is not possible to map every response or pattern in a cross-cultural setting, it is possible to 'build the skills to interpret, evaluate and develop effective communication strategies' (O'Sullivan, 1994) and to develop a sensitivity to the cues, signals and codes used by a culturally diverse library user cohort.

## RESPONSES FROM THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

In the context presented above, the library-user brings to the reference interface a body of 'customary beliefs, social forms and material traits' (Furnham & Bochner, 1982, 173) often quite foreign to the librarian. Responding to the differential needs of the library user in a climate of global change and cultural diversity, requires new skills and heightened sensitivity from the reference librarian. It also demands from the library manager new strategies for developing these skill-sets in the library staff.

There are a number of ways in which these can be addressed. In 1997, Alan Bundy observed that the importance 'yet to be clearly and consistently reflected in the funding or client focus' in the academic libraries of the Australian universities (Bundy, 1997, 149). Since then there has been some response, though it would be hard to define it as 'clear or consistent'. A reasonable degree of diversity and autonomy that characterises each university in Australia might explain the plurality of responses to global influences and internationalization of the sector. Two examples are quoted here. The University of Melbourne between 1998 and 2000 funded a series of professional development programs in cultural awareness conducted over three years by the Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit for the staff of its libraries. These programs are documented in the Australian Library Journal (McSwiney, Gabb & Piu, 1999). Addressing a different set of needs are the workshops for onshore staff and programs in library use and information literacy for staff and students conducted over the last three years offshore by library personnel of the University of South Australia.

By being pro-active in identifying and implementing research initiatives, by designing staff development programs with cultural awareness as their focus, and by investing funds and human resources in library education and information literacy programs specifically designed to address differential needs relating to cultural backgrounds, the library profession can add an important dimension to its research base and its literature. This forum and the theme of this conference are constructive steps towards this goal.

## CONCLUSION

Writing under the title *Runaway World*, in the 1999 Reith Lectures, Anthony Giddens observed that the effects of global trends cannot be ignored for they impinge on our professional and personal lives as the 'first generation to live in this global, cosmopolitan society whose contours we can as yet, only dimly see' (Giddens, 1999a). Giddens believes that

> Globalization is not incidental to our lives today. It is a shift in our very life circumstances. It is the way we now live (Giddens, 1999a).

I have suggested that the cultural implications of this context call for a shift from the comfort of routine and ritualised services to a level of cultural exchange that is energising and enriching for librarian and client alike (McSwiney, 2001). It is this ideal that has driven this paper, and can inspire our efforts towards understanding the diverse and culturally complex library user cohort whose information needs we strive to meet.

The question 'Who is my client?' needs to be asked again within the framework of a rich and dynamic cultural context, and it is in consciously seeking to understand this context that the library professional will move closer to finding an answer that ensures that our services are, indeed, appropriate and relevant.

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**Biographical Note**

Carolyn McSwiney is Australian-born and writes from a background of twenty years in education and educational administration in South Asia. Carolyn's first major research project was published as: *Essential Understandings: International students, learning, libraries*[2] and her doctoral thesis is titled: *Internationalization of the University: Implications for the Academic Library.*

[2] McSwiney, Carolyn. (1995). *Essential Understandings: International students, learning, libraries*. Adelaide: Auslib Press.

# Cultural Implications of a Global Context:

## The Need for the Librarian to Ask Again:

## 'Who Is My Client?'

**Carolyn McSwiney**

University of South Australia Library

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# *The Library Service Ethic:*

'Taking responsibility for the services we offer:

their quality
their accuracy
their relevance and
their appropriateness
to the needs of each individual user'

Levett, 1992



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*Globalization is 'stimulating nations to interact and to enrich each other with fresh cultural insights and exchanges' (Giddens, 1999)*

*It is the notion of*

promoting 'fresh cultural insights and exchanges' at the micro-level within the culture of the library profession

*that is at the heart of this paper.*

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# Global Information Reference Services

*For reflection:*

- Who is my client?
- Is it possible to offer equitable services?
- Are seamless services probable?

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*Review key terms:*

- Globalization
- Internationalization
- Transnational Services

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# Crossing National Boundaries

*Essential understandings:*

- Operational Issues
- Pragmatic Issues
- Culture dimensions

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# Operational Issues

*include different attitudes evident in*

- Finance and Corporate Culture
  - Corporate practice, business plans, marketing
- The Law
  - Privacy, intellectual freedom, copyright, freedom of expression
- Technology
  - Infrastructure, bandwidth, support, costs

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# Pragmatic Issues

*include*

- Shifting print material
  - Fax, mail, email…
- Local customs
  - Holidays, work practices, time zones
- Local networks, providers
- Costs vs cost of living

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# Cultural Issues

*Caution! Need to acknowledge:*

- *Complex overlays of cultures*
- *Risk of stereotyping*

- Power distances*
- Individualist & collectivist societies*
- Risk-taking vs Uncertainty avoidance*
- Cross-cultural communication
  - *Verbal, print, electronic*

*Hofstede Dimensions 1991



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# Power Distances

The extent to which less powerful members in an organization/institution within a country or society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally

Acceptance of differences of social class, education level, occupation

## Reflected in the reference transaction *in*

- *Perceptions of the librarian's education, professional standing*
- *Communication, signs of deference, use of honorifics*
- *Sensitivity to confrontation, contradiction, saving/loss of face, open criticism*

Cf Hofstede, 1991

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# *Individualist/Collectivist* Societies

- Individualism: societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself (& his/her family)
- Collectivism: societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups

## Reflected in information-seeking:

- Operate individually vs group work
- Independent approach vs wait for support
- Speak one's mind vs maintaining harmony 'at any cost'
- Task prevails over relationship vs relationship prevails over task.

Hofstede, 1991

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# *Risk-taking* Vs *Uncertainty Avoidance:*

*'What is different is dangerous'*

## Reflected in a Reference Transaction *in*

- Patterns in anxiety levels… 'having a go'…or… 'playing safe'
- Critical appraisal… or…suppressing opinions
- Flexibility… or … need for structures
- Librarian/teacher/boss supposed to have all the answers… It's OK to say 'I don't know'!

cf Hofstede, 1991



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# Responding to Internationalization

- Continuing professional development
- Awareness in the workplace
- Recognition of differential needs
  Client-focused services

Corporate - public – academic library contexts



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# Global Information Reference Services

*Let us ask again:*

- Who is my client?
- What means can be taken to deliver equitable services?
- How possible are seamless services?

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...rather than just talking about increasing global integration we should discuss basic shifts [that include] changes in our own inner consciousness and identity. Giddens, 2000

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It is in consciously seeking

to understand the framework of this rich and dynamic cultural context

that the library professional will move closer to ensuring

that information services are indeed 'appropriate' and 'relevant'.

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